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ABSTRACT

A study investigated gender differences in the descriptions of behaviors of the main characters in family stories in relation to worth and efficacy, and the association of success or failure with these dimensions. Respondents, 102 females and 22 males, from both first and second generations, were selected and asked to relate family stories, demographic information, and information concerning identification, family cohesiveness and other family characteristics. Story heroes were rated as to whether behaviors were stereotypically male, female or neutral, whether efficacy/worth was involved, and whether behavior ended in success or failure. A rating system for stereotypicality of behaviors had been developed previously in a pilot study. Results showed that few stories involved descriptions of efficacious failure, which in part may reflect the American work ethic. While females were described as more worthy in terms of the stereotypic female role as caregiver, males were described primarily in terms of efficacy. Variations in descriptions were associated with traditional gender roles rather than with certain personal attributes of the story teller. (A table of data is included, and seven references are attached.) (JK)

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Family Stories:
Gender Differences in Worth and Efficacy

(Subject index: 8.24)

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Running Head: Family Stories

Abstract

Family Stories exist as a legacy handed from one generation to another. These stories may function as morality tales and as socialization agents. The purpose of this study was to investigate gender differences in the descriptions of behaviors of the main characters in family stories in relation to worth (affiliation) and efficacy (instrumentality), and whether success or failure was associated with these dimensions. Variations in descriptions were associated with traditional gender-roles rather than with certain personal attributes of the story-teller.

Family Stories:
Gender Differences in Worth and Efficacy

Family stories serve as descriptive characteristics and as life events of relatives and are often seen as the legacy left to, and bond between, generations (Hagestad, 1984; Kivnick, 1986). Females more typically serve as family storytellers whereas stories are more often about males than females (Diedrick, Martin, & Hagestad, 1987; Martin, Hagestad, & Diedrick, in press). Stereotypically, efficacious action has been described as a primarily male attribute whereas caregiving (or worth) has been described as a female attribute (Bardwick, 1971). However, Bardwick noted that females are allowed more crossed-sex behaviors than are males. If family stories provide a continuity between generations, as Hagestad and Kivnick have suggested, is it possible that descriptions of an efficacious and/or worthy nature are associated with that process? Both efficacy (in providing financially for family) and worth (in providing love and nurture for family) may be seen as essential elements of family life.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate descriptions of main characters ("heroes") in terms of (a) efficacy (instrumentality), (b) worth (affiliation, caregiving), and (c) stereotypic/atypic gender-role behaviors. The following hypotheses were made:

1. Efficacious behavior would be described primarily in terms of success rather than failure.
2. Worth behavior would be described primarily in terms of success rather than failure.
3. Males would be described as behaving in efficacious ways more than would be females.
4. Females would be described as behaving in worthy ways more than would males.
5. Males would be described as behaving stereotypically "masculine" more than females would be described as behaving stereotypically "feminine."

Method

Sixty-four students at the University of Georgia interviewed 124 subjects from first and second generations. A total of 102 females and 22 males served as respondents. Respondents were asked to relate family stories, demographic information, and information concerning identification, family cohesiveness and other family characteristics. Interviewers also rated various aspects of the home environment and responsiveness of the respondents.

Story heroes (defined by respondents) were rated as to whether behaviors were stereotypically male or female or neutral, whether efficacy/worth was involved, and whether behavior ended in success or failure. In a pilot study the authors developed a rating system for stereotypicality of behaviors in order to rate the behaviors using a scale from 1 (extremely feminine) to 5 (extremely masculine). For

example, behaviors associated with independent actions, achievement activities, and stereotypic male work activities (such as becoming a doctor or lawyer) were considered stereotypic male activities. On the other hand, behaviors associated with concern for others, and roles such as raising children which showed such concern for others, was considered stereotypic feminine.

To categorize efficacy and/or worth, key words and descriptions were chosen from the work by Gecas and Schwalbe (1986) and Gaeddert (1985). For example, descriptions dealing with strength, intelligence, accomplishment of tasks, and power were coded as efficacy. Descriptions dealing with moral characteristics and caregiving were coded as worth. Lack of accomplishments (i.e., failure) in efficacy were descriptions of loss of business lack of intelligence, and so forth. Failure in worth dealt with descriptions of activities which hurt others or which resulted in poor relationships (shunning, degrading, or using violence against others).

Results

A total of 186 stories were told by the 124 respondents, but for the purposes of this investigation only the first two stories told by each respondent were analyzed because further stories were considered elaborations on the main characters of the second story. Females told 76 stories about male heroes, 55 about female heroes, and 5 about couples. Males told 17 stories about males, 5 stories about females, and 3

stories about couples. Results did not vary by gender of the story-teller.

The first hypothesis, that more stories involving successful than unsuccessful efficacious behaviors would be told, was upheld. A total of 48 successful instrumental stories existed (35%) versus only 8 (5%) stories of instrumental failure. All other stories did not contain instrumental components.

Of the 160 stories analyzed, 82 contained components relating to worthy or nonworthy behaviors, 40 (25%) involved descriptions of worthy behaviors in comparison with 42 (26%) in which unworthy behaviors (i.e., hurting others, etc.) were described. Thus contrary to the second hypothesis, relatives were not described as being more worthy than unworthy.

Descriptions of male and female heroes were compared in terms of efficacious and worthy behaviors (see Table 1). As expected, females were described more in terms of worthy behaviors and males more in terms of efficacious accomplishments, χ^2 (1, N=152)=12.39, p<.01. However, there existed no gender differences when considering total worth (both worthy and unworthy behaviors) and total efficacy behaviors, χ^2 (1, N=152)=3.83, p>.05.

Table 1 about here

It was surprising that so many heroes (32% of the males and 23% of the females) were described as behaving unworthy. Unworthy behaviors of males tended to be associated with violent behaviors and/or illegal acts whereas unworthy behaviors of females tended to be associated with snobbish or uncaring acts.

Male heroes were described more stereotypically than female heroes (84% of the males versus 46% of the females, χ^2 (1, N=152)=29.74, p<.001. This in consistent with Bardwick's (1971) contention that females are allowed more cross-sex behaviors than are males.

Conclusions

If family stories provide a continuity and bonding between generations, it is surprising so many stories involved descriptions of unworthy actions. Few stories involved descriptions of efficacious failure, however, which may in part reflect the American work ethic, and perhaps true shame in a family equates with lack of efficacy rather than lack of worth.

Females were described as more worthy than males, which is associated with the stereotypic female role as caregiver. As expected, males were described primarily in terms of efficacy, with few stories involving failure. These descriptions reflect stereotypic gender-role activities and may serve in part to socialize family members. Further

research is needed to determine more specifically the functions family stories serve for families and what differentiates families who tell unworthy stories from those who tell worthy stories.

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Table 1

Worth and Efficacy Behaviors of Story Heroes

Sex, Hero	Worthy	Unworthy	Efficacious	Unefficacious
Female	21 (35%)	14 (23%)	13 (22%)	1 (2%)
Male	12 (14%)	29 (32%)	30 (33%)	5 (5%)

Note: 2 stories of females and 1 story of a male hero involved both worthy and efficacious behavior.